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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that to be successful, a reading program must incorporate a synthesis from Robinson and Rauch (1965) which states that a reading program should be planned cooperatively by the total school community; integrate the language arts with all subject areas; plan for continuity of reading interests, achievement, and development; provide for frequent assessment; and be directed toward several attainable goals. The paper also suggests that the sum and substance of the effective reading program can be found in an adequate emphasis on: school organization, classroom organization, instructional and ancillary personnel, instructional and support materials, and individual and program evaluation. (TS)

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CRITERIA FOR EXCELLENCE: SUM AND SUBSTANCE*

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Educators charged with the responsibility of teaching the nation's children to read face demands from many segments of the population. "Why can't our children read?" ask researchers, legislators, parents, businessmen, teachers and other taxpayers. Unfortunately many request a simple, single answer. Teachers themselves look for answers as they are bombarded with words which haunt their reading world.

Advertisers' claims would have little impact on the professional witnout recognition of the hard truth in Schnepf and Meyer's (1971) statement,

> Generally speaking, educators have not given priority to program planning. As a consequence, insufficient time is set aside for improving reading programs. Curriculum planning committees must give extra time after school hours to their task. It is not surprising that they look for quick answers to their problems. New textbooks are often seen as the solution. (p. 9)

My thesis is that the criteria for excellence in a reading program cannot be stated in terms of materials used for instruction, but that to be successful, a reading program must incorporate a synthesis from Robinson and Rauch (1965) which reveals that a sound reading program should:

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1. be planned cooperatively by the total school community
2. coordinate reading activities with learning theory and with human growth and development
3. integrate the language arts with all subject areas
4. plan for continuity of reading interests, achievement, and developmental needs of students
5. make provisions for individual differences based on continuous diagnosis
6. provide for frequent assessment and modification of program goals, of implementation, and of evaluation
7. provide feedback to students, to school personnel, to parents, and to the community at large
8. be directed toward attainable goals:
   a. developing readers who can and do read for enjoyment, for information, to satisfy curiosity, or--just because . . .
   b. obtaining skill in the location and use of references related to a specific topic
   c. organizing and presenting ideas gathered from different sources.

The remainder of this paper suggests that the sum and substance of the effective reading program can be found within an adequate emphasis upon:

1. School organization
2. Classroom organization
3. Instructional and ancillary personnel
4. Instructional and support materials
5. Individual and program evaluation

School Organization

Who decides how a school will be organized?--The physical faculty? Staff? Support personnel?

How will students be assigned? Self-contained classroom? Pod? Department? Cross age-grade?

Many decisions are made at State Department and local school district level. It must be admitted that community involvement is occasionally sought when a new school is planned. Some District School Boards hold open hearings before building is initiated and staff selected. With or without input from constituencies, school organization frequently begins with an administrative-designate working under specified guidelines. The focus for the administrator is to open a school by a deadline date with as few problems as possible. Organization for a reading program generally follows several years later.

Curriculum committees begin the organizational task in form of change. While change may be initiated within a school; effective planning should include state and local administrators, professionals responsible for teacher

training and for research, parents, and other community leaders. A major question to be answered by the team is "how will this school be organized to reach desired educational goals?" Several options are available--given physical facility and staff: (a) self-contained classrooms, (b) cross-grade assignment, (c) departmentalization, (d) nongraded segments, (e) open-space, or pod area. Complete agreement among team members is not always reached, but study of each alternative can culminate with a decision to accept an organizational plan found successful in a similar school setting. To be sure, the organization must be considered workable by the professional staff and acceptable to the community.

Concurrently, other teams should be at work to identify goals for the reading program. Serious consideration must be given to the reading needs of the student population; as needs might dictate the organizational plan. Work for this team is clear: massive research of existing data, assessment and evaluation of student reading status, and directional trends in performance to be synchronized.

Standardized tests, with all of their reported limitations, must be used. Use of norm-referenced instruments to assess reading achievement and possible capacity for growth should not eliminate informal measures of reading behavior, of teacher pupil attitude, as such omission can lead to reporting success as failure or failure as

success. Other aspects of assessment I shall treat in another section of this paper; yet, I must state that teacher personality is crucial to school organizational success! Of what use is a pod school when every teacher is "self-contained"; or a self-contained class when every teacher is a subject area specialist; or cross-age/grade grouping when every teacher is a grade-level expert.

Classroom Organization

For purpose of this discussion classroom is defined as any physical space designated to be occupied by X teachers and X pupils. Post assignment decisions must be made, but some classroom organizational strategies are determined by school organization. The administration knows if 26+ children will be assigned to one teacher in a classroom; if four teachers will be assigned to one pod, open space, or learning center with 100+ pupils.

Additional decisions must be made regarding the delivery system. The classroom then becomes a school within a school. Questions again arise. Will one teacher instruct 25 children in a large group--requiring all to follow the same activities at the same time? Will the 25 pupils be sub-grouped according to "measured" reading achievement? Will an assessment-management system dictate pre-assessment on a series of skills and pupils be programmed into learning centers where instruction, reinforcement, practice or maintenance of skill is the goal? Will students

be provided opportunity to read for recreation, to research an area of interest, to produce educational materials, manipulatives, or just THINGS? Will hardware be available to supplement instruction, capture the poorly motivated, or provide a period of meditation?

In conjunction with affiliated personnel, the teacher must decide. One factor to be considered is that the classroom/learning environment should be organized to facilitate individualization of instruction. The classroom for an effective reading program additionally provides: (a) flexibility of physical environment and instructional strategies; (b) actualization of basic human needs--to belong, to be successful, to progress toward reasonable goals; (c) use of a variety of instructional personnel--peers, professionals, paraprofessionals, community workers; (d) realistic evaluation of progress; and (e) development of independent learners.

Durkin (1975) reports that classroom organization can be undercut by "little things". She cites poor timing of materials distribution, setting up noise situations, involving one child rather than a group in an activity, open temptations to distraction, and means which override the end--to list a few.

I refer you to "A Checklist for Evaluating Classroom Organization for Teaching" by Mary Brittain in Assessment Problems in Reading, edited by Walter MacGinitie. Brittain

suggests that classroom organization be evaluated in terms of (1) Student Characteristics, (2) Instructional Goals, and (3) Implementation.

Instructional and Ancillary Personnel

The teacher is the core member of an instructional team. No argument can be raised against the need for teacher training and experience because the teacher must translate plan into production. She must know what and how to teach, how to evaluate the quality of learning, and how to provide alternative strategies when initial attempts meet little or no success. Professional literature abounds with specifics relating what teachers should know, be able to do, and cause children to know and do. No better source is available than the International Reading Association Publication, Modular Preparation for Teaching Reading, edited by Sartain and Stanton (1974).

Allow me a point of departure in terms of teacher competence. In Chapter 2 of The Classification of Educational Goals Handbook: II, Krathwohl (1964) and others note the erosion of affective objectives, "It is evident to us that there is a characteristic type of erosion in which the original intent of a course or educational program becomes worn down to that which can be explicitly evaluated for grading purposes and that which can be taught easily through verbal methods . . ." (p.16)

These writers point to valuing as one vital aspect of the educational program. May I suggest that valuing the individual receive high priority in teacher behavior. Students are individuals; they bring to school individual aptitudes and attitudes. While verbalizing cliches intended to describe teaching toward individual needs, not all teachers truly accept individual differences. Attempts made to understand a pluralistic society lead to discussion of cultures and sub-cultures in American schools. Research studies, scholarly discourse, and instructional materials in recent years have attempted to provide educational guidelines.

What many of the presenters fail to communicate is as Biglmaier (1969) noted, "Culture is socially transmitted. Culture is learned behavior which each person acquires as a member of an organized group of individuals or society, and each personality is the product of its own unique cultural history." (p. 21)

Membership in a group does not eliminate "unique cultural history." Yet teachers and other professionals close their eyes to uniqueness when they plan programs especially for minority children--Blacks, Latins, American Indians and others whose "learned responses" are different from those of a majority of the class. An aspect of understanding differences lies in understanding the variability within groups. Not all Black children have

had the same experiences. Not all Spanish surnames represent the same history as is obvious in Florida's Cuban, Mexican and Puerto Rican Americans. The classroom teacher is not called upon to become a sociologist, an anthropologist, or a linguist. Being human is requisite to understanding differences. True acceptance of others begins with understanding and acceptance of one's self.

Extensive attention has been given to language differences brought ot the classroom. I take no sides here in the argument of language differences being a major barrier to success in learning to read. I merely cite personal behaviors exhibited on recent trips to countries where mine was not the majority language. From one to four weeks, I became "non-verbal". My communication reverted to primitive levels: pointing, head shaking, fragmented utterances, confusion in directions, and inappropriate learnings, not to mention gross mispronunciations. The factor which allowed me to dare venturing into the world of strangeness was the observed willingness of people to communicate. I submit that the teacher must be willing to communicate with each child: to listen though she cannot translate; to value though she cannot understand; to accept though she cannot believe.

Phony listening, valuing, and accepting will bring a teacher no success with children. They have a way of

knowing when teacher does not mean what she says; the physical posture and verbal utterances are in conflict.

While the teacher is characterized as the core of the instructional team, other professionals, paraprofessionals, volunteers, and community leaders work together for an effective program. Support personnel have their influence on the self-concept of children. These significant other professionals must approach instructional or guidance situations with a firm commitment that their role is important. They are partners with the teacher in fostering affective growth. With non-instructional adults, children often share emotions. If the classroom teacher, for the moment, must deal with skill development; another child is not forced to contain his emotions until her time is available. Other adults can provide immediate support for emotional relief. Additionally, numerous learning mediators can insure progress toward goals which spell success. As Quick (1973) has stated, "Self-Concept and achievement appear to be interrelated--that is, poor achievement usually promotes a depreciation of one's self-concept, which, in turn, leads to continued poor achievement". (p.469)

No one underestimates the value of parental interest in their children's academic progress. Reading is one of the first school tasks by which parents gage success. My belief is that each parent wants his child to succeed; to

be a good reader, and most of all to be a "good" child. Educational professionals fall short of their responsibilities when they fail to utilize the non-expert tasks which parents can obviously undertake: (a) supervising school work, (b) preventing peer situations which develop negative attitudes toward school, (c) exposure to social and occupational situations, (d) providing the food, clothing, and shelter which make it possible for the child to attend and learn from school.

Duncan and Vonbehren (1974) report a successful parent involvement program called PEPPER--Parent Educational Program to Pep up Every Reader. Freshour (1972) conducted evening sessions with parents and found that they wanted to help their children in school. Both studies indicate that parents can contribute significantly to the child's learning by attending physical needs, mediating between child and his environment, and developing positive self-concept.

Instructional and Support Material

My remarks regarding materials will be brief. Books do not teach children to read. There appears to be nothing inherent in a set of instructional materials which make them "good for" or successful with a group of children. For one child--maybe; as the format, content, and instructional procedure might strike his learning chord. But somewhere between child and materials there stands a teacher--not

necessarily college trained or certified but a teacher nonetheless.

As teachers struggle to decide whose bright box is best, they need some criteria against which to evaluate instructional materials. Two sources have been valuable to me as I have worked with pre and inservice teachers. "Criteria for Evaluating Basic and Supplementary Materials in Reading and Literature" a 1967 publication of the California State Department of Education and "The Application of a Category System in the Content Analysis of a Reading Program" by Johnson and others published in Elementary English, September, 1973. Use of these criteria statements against which to evaluate instructional materials prompted one teacher to comment, "Never again will I refer to interesting stories and cute pictures".

Individual and Program Evaluation

The effective reading program must be self-policing. Along with planning of objectives, there must be identification of proposed evaluation measures. As stated earlier in this paper, standardized tests have value but not as the sole indicators of progress; as tests alone do not tell the complete story. Much confusion exists in the minds of the public and in the procedures used by professions regarding differences in definitions of testing, assessment, diagnosis, and evaluation. I have chosen

evaluation to allow for inclusion of quantitative as well as qualitative reports, to allow for judgment and for hypothesis raising. The vocabulary of evaluation is adequately presented by Hill (1974). He further reports the need to include systematic observation, progress charts, checklists, library records, interviews, anecdoted records, and autobiographies for assessment. These evaluation measures can be used with individuals as well as with a total program.

To be sure, an informed public can accept evaluation of individuals and programs; the questions of time and finances are sure to arise. I submit that architects and builders to effective reading programs will find themselves out of work if time is not taken or money spent to tell the progress story as it really is. Why should we stand aside and let the "numbers" people report only a part of our success story? Yes, it might be easy to quantify student status, but what of the immediate and long range effect on school morale? We cannot expect public support of expensive failures. We cannot expect professional dedication to half-truths.

Individual and program evaluation might well be directed toward presentation of circumstantial evidence. Acceptance of this departure from traditional reporting might come slowly, but it must come if the promise of successful educational achievement is to be realized.

In summary, the criteria for effective reading programs are not written. They should not be written, but should evolve as each program moves from organization through implementation to evaluation. It is expected that these criteria should represent analysis of the most miserable failures and the most glowing successes. Of lasting value will be the continued process of "becoming" which should be characteristic of any institution whose prime beneficiaries are humans. The tasks are ours; YESTERDAY is a good time to begin.

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